

Back Rolling off the Boat into Underwater Archaeology

By; Elisabeth Servello

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It has been a pleasure responding to a number of private messages, several have a similar theme, *“I would like to get involved but what can I do?”* There is a reason we post here and encourage the involvement of the diving community on this project. It is the divers and their diverse skills that you take into the water or the project

If you make any serious effort to read up on underwater archaeology you end up reading books by Dr. George F. Bass and the last thing I was expecting was Dr. Bass to take the time to read McWilliam et al on accadenia.edu.

Perhaps things happen for a reason, and Dr. Bass is one of the founding fathers of modern underwater archaeology. When I first took an interest in underwater archaeology there was very little to even read on the subject. It is very difficult to find much published before 1970 and limited publications made it difficult to find a copy at the library.

Now there are many books on the subject and a huge amount of material on the internet. I enjoy escaping from the 500 channels of crap, put on the head set and hit auto read. Modern underwater archaeology began in 1910 in the Mediterranean at Antikythera Island. Dr. Bass, 1963, was the first second generation of underwater archaeologists. It was the first time an archaeologist was in charge of a project. Before that, when a government had an interest in an underwater archaeological site if it involved diving, they usually put a Navy officer in charge. Cousteau did several sites.

While it is true that in the end we are going to go underwater, (again) and try to do science, if you read up on the history of underwater archaeology you will go confidently into the water. While it is true that it has little to do with contemporary submerged field methodology, first generation underwater archaeology is a history of mess ups with poor field methodology. No matter what you do on site, someone else has already done a better job of messing up underwater than you ever will. It is hilarious. Cousteau did an excavation on a wreck and forgot to notice he was

actually working on two wrecks one on top of the other a few hundred years apart chronologically.

My all-time personal favorite underwater archaeology disaster story is the “Egypt” Salvage Team does underwater archaeology story.

The Excellent Diving Story.



The Egypt sunk in 1922 after a collision in heavy fog with five tons of gold onboard in 360' of water. Diving and salvage equipment was custom engineered for the recovery.

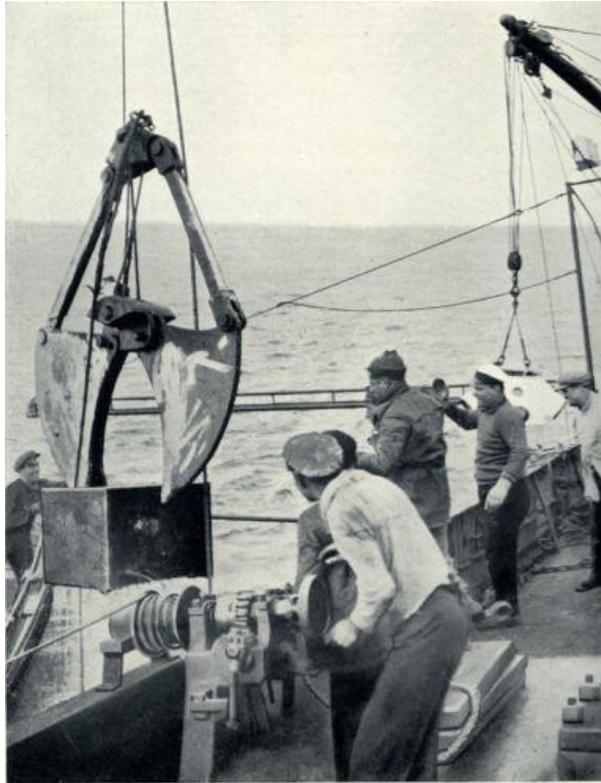


THE OBSERVATION-SHELL GOING DOWN. THE DIVER IS INSIDE IT AND THE LID HAS BEEN SCREWED ON

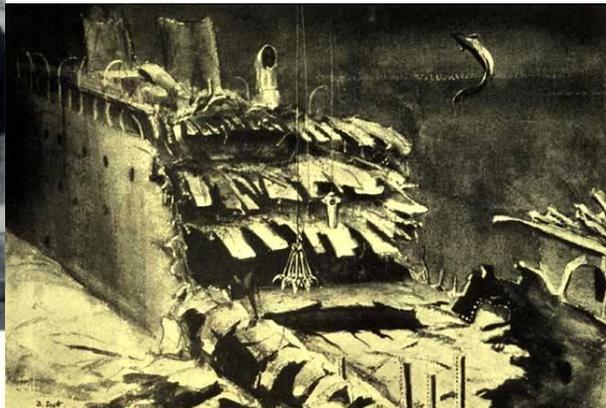


THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE 'EGYPT'. FRANCESCHI, JUST UP FROM THE WRECK, DESCRIBING WHAT HE HAS SEEN

A manned, simple but effective one atmosphere observation chamber was constructed that provided hard wire communications, an O2 rebreather and lighting.



THE CAPTAIN'S SAFE FROM THE 'EGYPT' COMING ABOARD THE 'ARTIGLIO'. NOTE HOW NEATLY THE GRAB IS HOLDING IT'



A variety of mechanical grabs, claws etc. were also employed to tear through the ship to access to the gold room. As illustrated in the photograph due to the weight of a safe full of gold these tools have considerable mass to do the job.

The salvage operation took place in 1934-35 and a key factor in the success of the salvage was extended periods of good weather during both years. After the successful salvage the company enjoyed a lot of good press and established themselves as world leaders in deep salvage operations.

The Underwater Archaeological Disaster Story.

Sponge divers located a large Roman Galleon with a cargo of amphora and other trade goods in deeper water of the Italian coast.



(Google Images)

Some of the salvage company's principals left the firm after the Egypt salvage but the company continued on. The Genoa biased salvage firm entered into an arrangement with the Italian government to "salvage" the vessel for the purpose of recovering the artifacts, which included art work. They did actually dive the site using standard hard hat diving gear and successfully recovered "choice" artifacts before being awarded the contract for the salvage.

Once on the site it became apparent that it was too deep to do a lot of diving on and the only economical way to bring the wreck to the surface was to use the same grabs they had employed on the Egypt salvage.



As you might suspect a two ton grab was not the first choice of the archaeological community, then or now for picking up 2,300 year old amphora. The site was totally destroyed, totally pulverized and nothing was recovered.

If you are interested and perhaps have dive buddies who would like to get evolved your help is welcome. Even if your tanks blow up on site you will at least have the comfort of knowing someone else made a bigger mess out of a submerged archaeological site. On the other hand, the, “oops I dropped the anchor on your 1,300 hundred year old pot,” line may take a bit of explaining.

Good divers sometimes hold themselves back. The fear of having a “dangly” on camera and earning the undying criticism of “parts” of the diving community is a poor reason not to go diving.

I will leave you with a link that I find interesting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us-TVg40ExM>

Stand by Me. Ben E, King, 1961 Cover by; Playing For Change. This is what I envision, you will note that musicians from all over the world participated via the internet. The new archaeology will be this kind of internet collaboration.

